

# THE WILSON BULLETIN

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## EDITORIAL

We trust that our readers will enjoy the colored frontispiece in this issue, for which we are deeply indebted to the artist, Mr. George Miksch Sutton, and to the engraver, Mr. Harry G. Lotz, of the Lotz Photo-Engraving Company. The picture is presented to the Club through the courtesy of these gentlemen.

It is our hope that our members will so appreciate this colored plate that they will wish to have one again at intervals. Such a colored plate is expensive and can be provided only with the income of a much increased membership, or with an endowment. We are optimistic enough to believe that our constituency will appreciate the colored reproduction of the bird, and also that it is financially able to make such a plate a regular feature of the BULLETIN. If you are interested in helping to bring this about will you not write to the Editor, or to some other officer of the Club? And in the meantime we express our thanks to the artist and to the engraver for this beautiful plate of the Avocet.

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Steps have been taken to devise a plan by which there may be established a permanent endowment fund for the W. O. C. For some time it has been realized that the organization needs such a fund, the income from which could be used exclusively for publication, and possibly for research. Such a fund would be built up by bequests, donations, and life memberships. All such endowments must have a beginning, which is often a very modest one, and usually the fund grows slowly. However, in this age of money it ought not to be an impossibility to raise a fund sufficient for our needs.

There may be some question as to what our needs are. We would say that we need a permanent income sufficient to equalize the fluctuating income from membership dues, in order to insure the regular publication of the Club's official organ at a non-fluctuating standard. This organ has, in the past, been hampered by lack of sufficient income for publication. At various times the size of the magazine has been curtailed. Even at the present time we are compelled to economize on illustration. In the present issue most of the illustrations are especially provided for, independently of the regular publication funds. We believe, too, that it would be possible at the present time to regularly increase the size of the magazine if the funds permitted. As time goes on these possibilities may become greater. The Club is now so well organized that there is no question as to its future permanency. We look forward to a future of steady growth and activity.

It is desirable to continue to issue a periodical such as ours at what may be considered a relatively low subscription price; or, what amounts to the same thing, to keep our membership dues sufficiently low to be within the reach of the younger generation. At the same time we cannot publish the kind of a magazine we desire at that price unless we can double our present membership and income. Commercial magazines pay their way chiefly by advertising. Very few scientific and educational periodicals are entirely self-supporting. This is not as it should be, of course, but true, nevertheless. The same is true of most educational and scientific institutions. Endowments are necessary for carrying on this work.

We are informed that the time is now ripe for the W. O. C. to make definite plans to provide for the care of such an endowment fund. The plan should be worked out as soon as it is possible to do so.

The committee appointed two or three years ago, with Mr. Whitney as chairman, has already given a good deal of study to the matter. This committee submitted a report at the Kansas City meeting. This report was not discussed as fully as it might have been, perhaps, if Mr. Whitney had been present to explain the technical phases of the plan. The matter was left with the committee (with slight change in personnel) with the agreement that if it is ready to make a report before the next annual meeting the Council may receive the report and act.

The problem now before the committee is to choose between the following fundamental plans of handling the fund:

First, the W. O. C. may incorporate and establish an endowment committee, the membership of which shall be bonded, and whose duty it shall be to properly invest the funds. The arguments for this method are that it will permit the Club to retain control of the fund, and it is assumed that the services of the committee will be gratis. The objections are that a committee or board of the Club will probably meet too infrequently; consultation will be carried on by correspondence, and investment will probably be delegated to one individual.

The second plan provides that the Club shall select some strong banking concern as a permanent trustee of all money intended for the endowment fund. The latter shall permanently and forever control the principal sum and pay the interest over to the properly designated officers of the Club at stated intervals. This would all be done under a legal trust agreement entered into by the two parties. The advantages of this plan are the insured permanency of the fund and the certainty of expert advice in investing the money. The objections offered are that the Club forever loses control of the principal, and has no means of initiating the discharge of the trustee; and also that the probable charges for handling the fund may be rather heavy while the fund is still small.

A third plan which has been suggested as a sort of compromise between the other two is that the endowment fund shall be handled by a bonded committee of the Club until the fund reaches a certain amount, when it is to be placed in the custody of a corporate trustee.

At any rate the officers of the Club will now be glad to hear from prospective donors to this endowment fund for the W. O. C., and are prepared to give assurance that all contributions will be carefully safe-guarded under one of the above plans. No definite plans beyond this have been announced, but there is nothing to prevent the immediate inauguration of the fund by contributions, or pledges, and these may be addressed, for the time being, to the President or Treasurer of the W. O. C., or to any member of the present Endowment Com-

mittee, which is composed as follows: Mr. T. H. Whitney, Vice-President of the Whitney Loan and Trust Company, Atlantic, Iowa; Professor M. H. Swenk, of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska; Mr. V. C. Bonesteel, Vice-President of the Security National Bank, Sioux City, Iowa. It may also be stated that the institution thus far mentioned as the possible corporate trustee is the Illinois Merchant's Trust Company, of Chicago. Bequests and donations may be made in any amounts; life membership will probably be fixed at \$100.00.

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We observe with a great deal of interest the remarks on the editorial page of our esteemed contemporary, the *Condor* (XXVIII, pages 103-4), under the heading "Species versus Subspecies." Herein Dr. Grinnell proposes a straw vote, yes or no, on the question of publishing a check-list of California birds with disregard for subspecies.

It has been rather difficult for us to be convinced of Dr. Grinnell's seriousness in this proposition; and yet, we read the remark that "even though primarily a systematist, [Dr. Grinnell] has a good deal of sympathy for the point of view of some of the objectors." This has the ring of sincerity, and we admire Dr. Grinnell the more for his breadth of view, his tolerance of opposite opinion, his conciliatory attitude, his evident appreciation of the difficulties of the collective ruff raff designated as "field ornithologists, collectors, oologists, etc."

We are compelled, therefore, somewhat reluctantly, to dissent from the *Condor's* editorial approval of the review in the *Auk*, as quoted in the *Condor*. With respect to this portion of the *Auk's* review we are reminded of the old story about Professor Huxley, whether true or not. Professor Huxley, so it goes, asked some student to describe a crayfish. The student replied that a crayfish is a little red fish that swims backward. The professor remarked that it was a very good answer except for three things, viz., that the crayfish isn't a fish, isn't red, and doesn't swim backward. So, the *Auk's* review is a very good one, in our opinion, except for three things.

Quoting from the *Condor* (XXVIII, page 103), the *Auk* (January, 1926, page 119) says: "The reviewer has no more personal use for subspecies separated on minute characters than has Mr.—, because they do not happen to concern the work in which he is most interested; but that is no reason why he should object to others describing them or using them in their work, nor does it give him any warrant to doubt the accuracy of their work." It would seem to us, however, that the accuracy of making subspecies is quite open to question by those who are qualified to question it. The question of accuracy is one which refers to concrete cases, and is, of course, open to scientific discussion. The objectionable implication in the quoted lines is that none but describers are interested or concerned in the multiplication of subspecies. It seems to us that we are here dealing with a very fundamental matter: it is a question of the purpose and function of taxonomy. It is the question as to whether taxonomy is an end in itself, or whether it is subservient to other branches of biological science. If other biologists were in nowise dependent upon nomenclature, or had no occasion to identify and name animals, then the taxonomist might have his way undisturbed.

"Why this rather general clamor against subspecies on the part of field ornithologists, collectors, oologists, etc., it is hard to understand." As one belonging somewhere in this grouping, if entitled to any classification among stu-



dents of birds, our curiosity was excited by this remark. But we will not push the inquiry.

“Let them be satisfied with the species, but do not try to hamper the work of those who can and do make use of them for the advancement of scientific knowledge.” We confess, somewhat shame-facedly, to our inability to see where subspecies are advancing our scientific knowledge of birds. We do understand, of course, that some ornithologists believe that many subspecies may be “incipient species”; and that some hundreds of years hence the processes of nature will have evolved a given subspecies into something different. And, Presto! our trinomial system of nomenclature will have been justified. But this will be a long time to wait. And, after all, will not the preserved skin and careful description of the species be just as competent witnesses in that future comparison as will be the subspecies?

No one, perhaps, is disposed to question the existence of those variations which are ranked as subspecific; the only question is whether we gain enough advantage by naming them to compensate for the confusion which follows. If not, then we do not think that science is advanced by so doing. We do not find fault with the study of variation, but simply with the unnecessary elaboration of the nomenclatural system.

Now to return to Dr. Grinnell's proposal of a California check-list which will omit the subspecies. Suppose that is done; and suppose that other states or localities prepare similar check-lists. It might ease the situation somewhat; but it might also lessen the authority of the A. O. U. check-list.

The A. O. U. check-list has played a most important part in the development of American ornithology, and we still need it. In time it may be superceded by an international check-list, but until the latter arrives we may need to safeguard the one we have. Perhaps the present solution of the problem will come through the exercise of more discretion by taxonomists and others who are now jeopardizing the check-list by over-zealous and unrestricted multiplication of named forms.

And in the meantime we trust that the more learned ornithologists in professional ranks will be able to exercise a reasonable degree of consideration and patience toward the amateur ornithologists, who, by the way, outnumber the former many times; and whose interest in the aggregate doubtless make it possible for a greater number of professional ornithologists to devote their full time to this branch of science.

Since the preceding comments were prepared we have learned from a later issue of the *Condor* (XXVIII, page 136) that the subspecies question has been settled so far as the Cooper Club is concerned. While a small number voted in the balloting, yet it is significant that forty per cent of the votes cast were opposed to subspecies—at least were opposed to their retention in the proposed state list. This is quite a respectable minority. Perhaps the vote was not heavier because the straw vote was not generally taken seriously; and possibly some of the ballots against the proposed check-list with subspecies omitted were made on other grounds than an attitude for or against subspecies. And so our conclusion is that the ballot was interesting, but not conclusive.